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COLERIDGE ON IMAGINATION AND FANCY

By BASIL WILLEY

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WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

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By BASIL WILLEY

Read 29 May 1946

A RECENT critic has referred to Coleridge's distinction between Imagination and Fancy as 'celebrated but useless'. 'Celebrated' we know it to be; its 'usefulness', however, cannot be determined without raising some important questions. Are we interested in inquiring into the nature of poetry, and the ways in which it comes to be written? Do we wish to think seriously of poetry as in some sense an approach to truth? Has it any significant relationship with life in general? What place can we give it in our scheme of values? And if we decide that poetry can make a vital contribution to the good life, how can we determine which are the best kinds of poetry? It seems to me that Coleridge's distinction can be 'useful', not by furnishing us with final or explicit answers to such questions, but by deepening and enriching our understanding of their meaning. It is natural and right that questions like these should occasionally be asked, and it would be surprising if the greatest of our poet-critics had no light to throw upon them. It is in the hope of gaining a glimmer of such light, then, that I want, in this lecture, to examine first what Coleridge meant by his distinction between Imagination and Fancy; secondly, why he thought it so important; thirdly, how far it retains any importance for us.

1. We can best begin by reminding ourselves of the passage in the *Biographia Literaria*, chapter iv, where Coleridge describes the birth of his own idea. It came to him, we find, as a direct result of his discovery of Wordsworth's poetry; here was a new poet, speaking with a superiority of accent which linked him with the great poets of a former age. To what was that superiority due? What was it that lifted Wordsworth above the eighteenth-century level, and placed him with Shakespeare or Milton? Already, while an undergraduate at Cambridge, Coleridge had been greatly impressed by the *Descriptive Sketches*: 'seldom, if ever,' he writes, 'was the emergence of an original poetic genius above the literary horizon more evidently announced.' But two years later came a more memorable experience:

> I was in my twenty-fourth year, when I had the happiness of knowing

Mr. Wordsworth personally, and while memory lasts, I shall hardly forget the sudden effect produced on my mind, by his recitation of a manuscript poem [afterwards incorporated in *Guilt & Sorrow*].

What struck Coleridge in this poem was not so much the 'freedom from false taste'; it was

> the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew-drops.

This peculiar excellence, he goes on to tell us, 'I no sooner felt than I sought to understand'—a phrase which (we may note in passing) epitomizes Coleridge's distinctive quality as a critic: he first feels keenly, and then tries to understand what he has felt.

> Repeated meditations led me first to suspect (and a more intimate analysis of the human faculties . . . matured my conjecture into full conviction) that fancy and imagination were two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being, according to the general belief, either two names with one meaning, or, at furthest, the lower and higher degree of one and the same power.

It is well known that when Coleridge felt himself confronted by an important duty he instinctively shrank from it, or postponed its performance to a more auspicious occasion. Hence his endless digressions and asides, both in writing and in conversation, and hence his habit of scattering his most pregnant remarks in marginalia or footnotes, where he could say the vital thing *tanquam aliud agendo*. Unfortunately this desynonymizing of Fancy and Imagination seemed to him a supremely important task, and he accordingly shies off at a tangent whenever he approaches it. We have therefore to be content with hints and glimpses, and must piece together his meaning from several scattered passages. All he vouchsafes here is that Milton had a 'highly *imaginative*' and Cowley a 'very *fanciful*' mind; that the distinction is analogous to that between *delirium* and *mania*; and that it can be illustrated by contrasting Otway's line

> Lutes, lobsters, seas of milk and ships of amber[1]

with Shakespeare's

> What! have his daughters brought him to this pass?

These interesting suggestions are here left undeveloped, but they

[1] Coleridge misquotes Otway, who actually wrote

> Lutes, laurels, seas of milk and ships of amber.

foreshadow the fuller account in chapter xiii and in the Shakespeare Lectures. In delirium the mind pours forth its contents incoherently, that is, with no unifying principle to order its sequences save the law of association; in mania, the mind, obsessed by a fixed idea, sees and interprets all things in relation to that idea, and so has (though in a morbid form) a co-ordinating power. If we translate disease into health, delirium becomes Fancy, and mania Imagination: Fancy assembling and juxtaposing images without fusing them; Imagination moulding them into a new whole in the heat of a predominant passion.

We may now turn to chapter xiii, where Coleridge, face to face at last with his central problem, and alarmed by his own chapter heading: 'On the imagination, or esemplastic power', slips lizard-like into a thicket of learned excerpts, and vanishes from sight, leaving in our hands his tail only—a letter from himself to himself about his forthcoming masterpiece. But the tail is not without a sharp point—the last two paragraphs, and these we must now inspect. First, what of the distinction here introduced between the two kinds of Imagination, the Primary and the Secondary? I fear that some readers are misled by the oracular sublimity of Coleridge's definition of the former: 'The primary Imagination', he declares (in oft-quoted words),

> I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.

This is not to be dismissed as metaphysical babble; a weight of thought, indeed a whole philosophy, lies beneath each phrase. Coleridge is here summarizing the great struggle and victory of his life—his triumph over the old tradition of Locke and Hartley, which had assumed that the mind in perception was wholly passive, 'a lazy looker-on on an external world'. We should here recall the letter to Poole, written in March 1801, in which Coleridge announces the overthrow of 'the doctrine of association as taught by Hartley, and with it all the irreligious metaphysics of modern infidels'. The mind, he now teaches, works actively in the mere act of perception; it knows its objects not by passive reception, but by its own energy and under its own necessary forms; indeed, it knows not mere objects as such, but itself in the objects:

> If the mind be not *passive*, if it be indeed made in God's Image, and that, too, in the sublimest sense, the *Image of the Creator*, there is ground for suspicion that any system built on the passiveness of the mind must be false, as a system. (*Letters*, i. 352.)

In speaking thus of the Primary Imagination, then, Coleridge is affirming that the mind is essentially and inveterately creative; 'we receive but what we give', and in the commonest everyday acts of perception we are making our own world. We make it, indeed, not *ex nihilo*, but out of the influxes proceeding from nature, or as Coleridge preferred to say, 'the infinite I AM'. Whatever we perceive is what we have made in response to these stimuli; perception is an activity of the mind, not a merely mechanical registering of impressions. However (and this is now the point to be emphasized), it is the Secondary Imagination, not the Primary, which he proceeds to contrast with Fancy; it is the Secondary Imagination which is at work in the making of poetry. For how does it operate?

> It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate . . . it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

Here speaks the seer, the poet and the romantic; not content with the automatic 'poetry' which we all create, and which we call the world of everyday appearances, he would transcend this for a vision more intense, more true, than is afforded by the light of common day. The daily routine world may be the product of a faculty essentially creative—indeed, in opposition to Locke and Hartley, Coleridge asserts that it is—yet in itself it is cold and inanimate, filled only with 'the many shapes of joyless daylight'. As Sidney had expressed it in his *Apologie*, nature's world is brazen, 'the poets only deliver a golden'. To retain the Midas-touch, to be constantly in possession of the transforming power, this for Coleridge meant life, and joy, and triumph; to lose it meant failure and spiritual death, the reduction of existence to a state of somnambulism; in which we languish amidst

> The repetitions wearisome of sense
> Where soul is dead, and feeling hath no place.
> (Wordsworth, *Excursion*, iv. 620.)

Coleridge knew all too well the misery of this condition; it was the mood of dejection which he describes in the Ode of that title, where, like Wordsworth (but without the Wordsworthian compensation) he laments the passing of the visionary gleam:

> And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
> Than that inanimate cold world allowed
> To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
> Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
> A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
> Enveloping the Earth. . . .

If we ask, then, what is it which the Secondary Imagination must 'dissolve, diffuse, and dissipate', the answer is given here: it is the 'inanimate, cold world' of the Primary Imagination; all that is allowed to the daily, prosaic consciousness of average humanity, and to poets themselves when power deserts them. I shall say a word more on this topic later, but I would suggest here in passing, that this desire (as Wordsworth expresses it)

> for something loftier, more adorned,
> Than is the common aspect, daily garb
> Of human life (*Prelude*, v. 575).

is no mere romantic escapism, though it may sometimes take that form; it is the originating impulse of poets at all times (including our own time), and not merely of poets, but of seers and saints and scientists as well—of all whose task it is to fight the habit of

> Viewing all objects unremittingly
> In disconnection dead and spiritless (*Excursion*, iv. 961).

The Imagination, then (we may now drop the word 'secondary'), is the mind in its highest state of creative insight and alertness; its acts are acts of growth, and display themselves in breaking down the hard commonplaceness which so easily besets us, and in re-moulding this stubborn raw material into new and living wholes. And now, what of Fancy? These are Coleridge's well-known words:

> Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space. . . . But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

In so far as it involves acts of selection and of arrangement ('that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word Choice'), Fancy is on a higher level than mere perception or mere memory. But it is below Imagination in that, instead of making all things new, it merely constructs patterns out of *ready-made* materials, 'fixities and definites'. It juxtaposes images, but does not *fuse* them into unity; its products are like mechanical mixtures (as of salt with iron filings), in which the ingredients, though close together, remain the same as when apart; whereas those of Imagination are like chemical compounds (say, of sodium and chlorine), in which the ingredients lose their separate identities in a new substance, composed of them indeed, but differing from them both. We may fitly use, as an illustration, the two passages quoted by Coleridge himself

from *Venus and Adonis*, on which Dr. I. A. Richards has ably commented in his *Coleridge on the Imagination*. The first, illustrating Fancy, is:

> Full gently now she takes him by the hand,
> A lily prison'd in a gaol of snow,
> Or ivory in an alabaster band;
> So white a friend engirts so white a foe.

On this Dr. Richards observes that the activity of putting together these images is, as Coleridge has said, that of choice, 'an empirical phenomenon of the will'; it is 'an exercise of selection from amongst objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped, but have been already fixed'. 'Lily' and 'snow', 'ivory' and 'alabaster', are drawn out from the storehouse of memory and juxtaposed, but they remain themselves, not passing into each other, nor becoming one with the hands of Venus and Adonis with which they are compared. We may note here another remark of Coleridge on Fancy: its images, he says, 'have no connexion, natural or moral, but are yoked together by the poet by means of some accidental coincidence' (*Table Talk*, 23 June 1834). Many of the conceits of the Metaphysical poets, and of some modern poets, could be classified in this way as fanciful, for instance Donne's comparison of his mistress's hair with his own spinal cord, or Herbert's comparison of his sins with rocks in the stream of the Redeemer's blood. Two other examples, one serious and one frivolous, may serve to clarify the point:

(*a*) So, when the Sun in bed,
Curtain'd with cloudy red,
Pillows his chin upon an Orient wave
(Milton, *Ode, On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*).

(*b*) And, like a lobster boiled, the morn
From black to red began to turn (Butler's *Hudibras*).

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The juxtapositions of 'chin and pillow' with 'Sun' and 'Orient wave', and of the boiling lobster with dawn, are products of the faculty, which, in another phrase of Coleridge's, brings together 'images dissimilar in the main by some one point or more of likeness'. In neither example is there any plastic stress shaping the images into one; the poets are not *realizing* a situation nor compelling us to do so.

Coleridge's second Shakespearean example, illustrating Imagination, is this:

> Look! how a bright star shooteth from the sky,
> So glides he in the night from Venus' eye.

His comment is:

> How many images and feelings are here brought together without effort and without discord—the beauty of Adonis—the rapidity of his flight—the yearning yet helplessness of the enamoured gazer—and a shadowy ideal character thrown over the whole.

This is 'imaginative', according to Coleridge, because Shakespeare is here seen in the act of realizing, making real to himself and to us, the departure of Adonis from Venus; the fall of the shooting star and the flight of Adonis become one in a flash of creative vision, and are henceforth inseparable. Or take a well-known line from *The Merchant of Venice*:

> How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!

In saying that the moonlight 'sleeps', Shakespeare has said an imaginative thing; the more one dwells upon the metaphor, the more intimate become the links between sleep and moonlight—silence, the prone position of sleeper and moonlit bank, tranquillity, unconsciousness, a trance-like or enchanted state: Shakespeare has seen that all these (and more) are qualities which sleep and moonlight have in common, and in a single word he has made them permanently one. Here is a final pair of illustrations, taken this time from Keats:

(Fancy)

> When Cynthia smiles upon a summer's night,
> And peers among the cloudlets jet and white,
> As though she were reclining in a bed
> Of bean blossoms, in heaven freshly shed.
> (*To Charles Cowden Clarke.*)

(Imagination)

> . . . the moon, lifting her silver rim
> Above a cloud, and with a gradual swim
> Coming into the blue with all her light.
> (*I stood tiptoe. . . .*)

I suggest that the first passage is fanciful, because in spite of the *curiosa felicitas* of the comparison (it is based upon accurate observation), moonlit cloudlets do not really fuse with bean blossoms, chequered though they both are. The black-and-white is their only link; the warmth and scent of the beanfield, and all its suggestions of summer daytime and luxury are unwanted here, whereas in imagination all the essential qualities of the images are made to interpenetrate. In the second passage I think this actually happens; the key-word is 'swim', which is emphasized by its position at the end of the line. Here everything connected with the movement of a swimmer is apt and relevant to the moon: slow, smooth, steady, purposive motion,

and motion in a blue, liquid medium (the night sky is well realized as a sea, with clouds as islands). It is significant that when Keats is treating the moon thus imaginatively he does not need to call her Cynthia.

2. This distinction between kinds of poetry has become so familiar that we may forget that we owe the perception of it to Coleridge. But we must now ask, why did Coleridge think it so important? It was important for him, because, as Wordsworth said, 'to him the unity of all had been revealed'; he was of that rare class of minds which cannot contemplate any one thing without becoming aware of its relation to everything else. For Coleridge, any important thought or distinction in one field must have its counterpart in another, and in every other. The Fancy-Imagination antithesis is not merely the product of literary sensitiveness in Coleridge, though it may have taken its origin from this; it is also a vital stage in his life-and-death struggle against the mechanical materialism of the eighteenth century. He needed the distinction, that is, not merely to show why one line of Shakespeare is superior to another, or why Milton and Wordsworth are superior to Cowley or Gray, but also because it was essential to his campaign against what he called the 'philosophy of death'. J. S. Mill has truly said that 'the Germano-Coleridgean doctrine expresses the revolt of the human mind against the philosophy of the eighteenth century'; where the eighteenth century, he continues, was innovative, prosaic, and infidel, the nineteenth was conservative, poetical, and religious. Coleridge is the leading English representative of this general European reaction. He is representative of his own generation, too, in that he himself, in his own personal development, evolved from the eighteenth-century to the nineteenth-century standpoint, for we must remember that he had originally been a materialist and a necessitarian of the school of Hartley, and a Unitarian of the school of Priestley. The vital moment of his development (and the same may be said of his age as well) was his awakening to all that had been undreamed of in the philosophy of the previous century. There was at this time a new spirit afloat, a sense that there were spiritual needs, and unseen realities, which had been unrecognized in the religious, ethical, political, and aesthetic teachings of the immediate past. The new demand was for an interpretation of the whole range of human experience which should be richer, more deeply satisfying, than the old, dry, and superficial rationalism. Coleridge became convinced that the tradition of

Descartes and Locke had 'untenanted Creation of its God', and substituted

> a universe of death
> For that which moves with light and life informed,
> Actual, divine, and true.

Speaking of the modern scientific and commercial spirit, he says: 'We have purchased a few brilliant inventions at the loss of all communion with life and the spirit of nature.' This protest of the imaginative consciousness against the scientific 'neutralization of nature'—a protest which is one of the deepest meanings of romanticism—has been vehemently repeated by the arch-romantic of our own century, D. H. Lawrence: 'Give me the mystery!' he cries, 'and let the world live again for me!' Or,

> The universe is dead for us, and how is it to come alive again? 'Knowledge' has killed the sun, making it a ball of gas with spots; 'Knowledge' has killed the moon—it is a dead little earth fretted with extinct craters as with smallpox; the machine has killed the earth for us. . . . How, out of all this, are we to get back the grand orbs of the soul's heavens, that fill us with unspeakable joy? How are we to get back Apollo, and Attis, Demeter, Persephone, and the halls of Dis? We've got to get them back, for they are the world our soul, our greater consciousness, lives in. The world of reason and science . . . this is the dry and sterile little world the abstracted mind inhabits . . . the two ways of knowing, for man, are knowing in terms of apartness, which is mental, rational and scientific, and knowing in terms of togetherness, which is religious and poetic.

This 'knowing in terms of togetherness' is very much what Coleridge claimed for Imagination in poetry, and for Reason in religion and ethics. 'The modern mind', he wrote in the *Statesman's Manual*, 'has become infected with the contagion of its mechanic philosophy.' With the words of Lawrence in our minds, let us turn to Coleridge's diagnosis of the spiritual maladies of England since the Glorious Revolution. It appears in phrases like these (taken from *The Friend*): 'Mechanical philosophy'; 'a system of natural rights instead of social and hereditary privileges'; 'Imagination excluded from poesy'; 'The wealth of nations substituted for the well-being of nations and of man'; or these (from the *Constitution of Church and State*): 'The guess-work of general consequences substituted for moral and political philosophy'; 'The true historical feeling, the immortal life of the nation, generation linked to generation by faith, freedom, heraldry, and ancestral fame, languishing and giving place to the superstitions of wealth and newspaper reputation.'

Lawrence's 'two ways of knowing' appear in Coleridge under the designation of Reason and Understanding, a distinction as central in his religious and ethical thought as that of Imagination and Fancy in his literary theory. Indeed it is the same distinction transposed into another key, Reason being to Understanding what Imagination is to Fancy. It is important to grasp the meaning of the Reason-Understanding distinction and its relation to Imagination-Fancy; nothing better illustrates the unity and scope of Coleridge's thought than this: that with him a literary distinction cannot remain that and nothing more, but must pass into an antithesis of two contrasted world-views. He gives meanings of his own to 'Reason' and 'Understanding', which are not those of ordinary parlance: Reason is 'the organ of the supersensuous'; Understanding is the faculty by which we generalize and arrange the phenomena of perception. Reason is 'the knowledge of the laws of the whole considered as one'; Understanding is 'the science of phenomena'. Reason seeks ultimate ends; Understanding studies means. Reason is 'the source and substance of truths above sense'; Understanding is the faculty which judges 'according to sense'. Reason is the eye of the spirit, the faculty whereby spiritual reality is spiritually discerned; Understanding is the mind of the flesh. Understanding has a wide and legitimate field of activity: it is necessarily used for measurement, analysis, classification, and all the other processes of natural science, and it controls our lives on the practical routine level. It begins to err when it encroaches on the spheres where Reason alone is valid, that is, when it pretends to erect its limited theories into absolute laws, mistaking a technique of experiment or a method of classification for an exhaustive account of reality. And this, for Coleridge, was precisely what had happened in the eighteenth century: with what results? Materialism, determinism, atheism, utilitarianism, the 'godless revolution', 'moral science exploded as mystic jargon', the 'mysteries of religion cut and squared for the comprehension of the understanding', 'imagination excluded from poesy' (you will have noticed how this last phrase occurs not in isolation, but as an item in the general polemic). He sums up in a passage strikingly similar in meaning (though not in vocabulary) to the passage I quoted from Lawrence:

> The groundwork therefore of all true philosophy is the full apprehension of the difference between the contemplation of reason, namely that intuition of things which arises when we possess ourselves as one with the whole . . . and that which presents itself when . . . we think of our-

selves as separated beings, and place nature in antithesis to the mind, as object to subject, thing to thought, death to life. (*The Friend.*)

This last is 'abstract knowledge', the product of the 'mere reflective faculty'; it is useful for the practical exigencies of daily living, but in itself it is 'the translation of a living word into a dead language'.

Coleridge's central preoccupation was with the antithesis between a living whole or organism on the one hand and a mechanical juxtaposition of parts on the other. The eighteenth century had reduced the universe to an assemblage of parts, the mind of man to an aggregate of sense-impressions, and poetry to a judicious arrangement of ready-made images culled from the memory. Coleridge cared so intensely about the distinction between the mechanical and spiritual world-views that he habitually used the images of 'death' and 'life' to express it; the struggle he was engaged upon was indeed, for him, a matter of life and death. He hoped that Wordsworth, in his projected philosophical poem, would teach the world

> . . . the necessity of a general revolution in the modes of developing and disciplining human life, by the substitution of life and intelligence for the philosophy of mechanism, which in everything that is most worthy of the human intellect strikes *Death*, and cheats itself by mistaking clear images for distinct conceptions, and which idly demands conceptions where intuitions alone are adequate to the truth.

In all this Coleridge is using the certainties of Plato, of Christianity and of German idealism (together with his own profoundest intuitions) as weapons against the eighteenth-century tradition, just as the Cambridge Platonists had used Platonism and Christianity against Hobbes. Lawrence, in our century, could only appeal to the blood, the solar plexus, and the dark gods of paganism. To Coleridge it seemed that the most important of all truths were precisely those which could not, like those of mathematics, be demonstrated by the understanding: the existence of God, the freedom of the will, and the autonomous power of the soul. It is the conscience, not the intellect, which commands us to attribute reality to these truths, because without them our moral life would be unmeaning. In setting up Reason and Imagination above the mind of the flesh, Coleridge was seeking to protect the region of spiritual experience against all attacks from the mere understanding, that is, against the *Zeitgeist*. Is there a living God, in whom all things live and move and *have* their being (not *had*)? Is nature a living organism? Is there a bond between nature and the soul of man? Is the soul of man

active and creative, not a link in the chain of causation? To all these questions Coleridge answered passionately 'Yes!' We have not said the last word about Coleridge's theory of the Imagination, until we have said that for him it was inseparable from the defence of religion. The question about the Imagination was of supreme importance, because it was a part of the question about God.

3. Having glanced at some of the wider bearings of Coleridge's theory, we may briefly return, in conclusion, to its poetic applications. The Imagination was concerned not merely in the creation of living metaphor (as in the examples quoted above); as the coadunating, shaping power its function was to see all things as one, and the one in all things. It was typically displayed in 'the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities'. What discordant qualities? Here are some given by Coleridge: 'a sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects'; 'a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order'; 'to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature'; 'sameness with difference'; 'truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the object observed'; 'reducing multitude to unity' or 'succession to an instant'. These are all modes of the fundamental imaginative activity: dissolving in order to re-create, struggling to idealize and to unify 'dead' objects. Objects, taken as such, are fixed and dead, but it is the uncreative mind which fixes and kills them. They need not be so taken; when imaginatively seen they can be vitalized with an energy which comes indeed from within the mind, but which is also, mysteriously, their *own* life so revealed. The cold world of objects will not seem alive unless the poet takes the initiative.

To grasp the significance of Fancy in this wider context, we must remember that in Coleridge's view the mental habits of the previous century had resulted in the exclusion of imagination from poetry. Since Milton, poets had on the whole ceased to maintain the creative interchange between mind and object, and had been content to use ready-made material created in earlier, more imaginative times, or at best to say supremely well what had been greatly imagined by others, but less perfectly uttered. As we have seen, the essence of the imagination was that it involved the poet's whole soul in a creative act; Fancy merely used the results of previous activity. This, for Coleridge, was the only kind of poetic activity possible in the eighteenth-century climate; it had taken the form of selecting images from

older poets—from the ancients, from Milton, and later from Celtic, Norse, or medieval sources. 'The Gothic' was at first fancifully used rather than imaginatively, but it helped, in virtue of its unfamiliarity, to evoke new imaginative life. It encouraged the poet (in a phrase of Mrs. Radcliffe) 'to send forward a transforming eye into the distant obscurity'. If we remind ourselves of the age in which Coleridge lived, we shall not wonder that notions of life, growth, and *transformation* were in the ascendant. In the first half of the eighteenth century life was conducted, on the whole, within a framework which was accepted as fixed and final. Fixities and definites were the order of the day: in society, the appointed hierarchy; in religion, the establishment; in nature, the admirable order with its Chain of Being and its gravitational nexus which was mirrored in humanity by 'self-love and social'; in art, the rules and the proprieties. The aim of politics, religion, and philosophy was not to transform, but to demonstrate and confirm existing perfection; the aim of poetry was to decorate. But with the onset of the revolutionary age all this was altered; the fixities yielded to flux, mechanics to life and organism, order to process, and the imaginative mouldings of the poets reflected on the ideal plane the great social changes which were proceeding on the material level. Life, and growth, and consciousness—those very mysteries which had never fitted comfortably into the mechanical scheme, now came into their own. Poets could feel, as seldom before, and hardly since, that they were allies of the ascendant forces, the leaders and legislators of mankind, instead of being elegant triflers or refugees from reality:

> O pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
> For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood
> Upon our side, us who were strong in love!

Within the life-span of Wordsworth and Coleridge most of this transforming energy of love and hope was deflected by events from political into imaginative and ideal channels; the soul comforted itself for political disillusionment by exulting in its own 'mighty and almost divine powers' (Wordsworth, 1815 *Preface*). Nothing, it seemed, could be more important than exertions of such powers, nothing more satisfying than their results—so satisfying, that they could only be expressed in terms of 'Truth'. For the human mind, for better or worse, does call by the name of Truth whatever deeply satisfies, as well as that which, on the practical level, is found to *work*. But—and this

active and creative, not a link in the chain of causation? To all these questions Coleridge answered passionately 'Yes!' We have not said the last word about Coleridge's theory of the Imagination, until we have said that for him it was inseparable from the defence of religion. The question about the Imagination was of supreme importance, because it was a part of the question about God.

3. Having glanced at some of the wider bearings of Coleridge's theory, we may briefly return, in conclusion, to its poetic applications. The Imagination was concerned not merely in the creation of living metaphor (as in the examples quoted above); as the coadunating, shaping power its function was to see all things as one, and the one in all things. It was typically displayed in 'the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities'. What discordant qualities? Here are some given by Coleridge: 'a sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects'; 'a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order'; 'to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature'; 'sameness with difference'; 'truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the object observed'; 'reducing multitude to unity' or 'succession to an instant'. These are all modes of the fundamental imaginative activity: dissolving in order to re-create, struggling to idealize and to unify 'dead' objects. Objects, taken as such, are fixed and dead, but it is the uncreative mind which fixes and kills them. They need not be so taken; when imaginatively seen they can be vitalized with an energy which comes indeed from within the mind, but which is also, mysteriously, their *own* life so revealed. The cold world of objects will not seem alive unless the poet takes the initiative.

To grasp the significance of Fancy in this wider context, we must remember that in Coleridge's view the mental habits of the previous century had resulted in the exclusion of imagination from poetry. Since Milton, poets had on the whole ceased to maintain the creative interchange between mind and object, and had been content to use ready-made material created in earlier, more imaginative times, or at best to say supremely well what had been greatly imagined by others, but less perfectly uttered. As we have seen, the essence of the imagination was that it involved the poet's whole soul in a creative act; Fancy merely used the results of previous activity. This, for Coleridge, was the only kind of poetic activity possible in the eighteenth-century climate; it had taken the form of selecting images from

older poets—from the ancients, from Milton, and later from Celtic, Norse, or medieval sources. 'The Gothic' was at first fancifully used rather than imaginatively, but it helped, in virtue of its unfamiliarity, to evoke new imaginative life. It encouraged the poet (in a phrase of Mrs. Radcliffe) 'to send forward a transforming eye into the distant obscurity'. If we remind ourselves of the age in which Coleridge lived, we shall not wonder that notions of life, growth, and *transformation* were in the ascendant. In the first half of the eighteenth century life was conducted, on the whole, within a framework which was accepted as fixed and final. Fixities and definites were the order of the day: in society, the appointed hierarchy; in religion, the establishment; in nature, the admirable order with its Chain of Being and its gravitational nexus which was mirrored in humanity by 'self-love and social'; in art, the rules and the proprieties. The aim of politics, religion, and philosophy was not to transform, but to demonstrate and confirm existing perfection; the aim of poetry was to decorate. But with the onset of the revolutionary age all this was altered; the fixities yielded to flux, mechanics to life and organism, order to process, and the imaginative mouldings of the poets reflected on the ideal plane the great social changes which were proceeding on the material level. Life, and growth, and consciousness—those very mysteries which had never fitted comfortably into the mechanical scheme, now came into their own. Poets could feel, as seldom before, and hardly since, that they were allies of the ascendant forces, the leaders and legislators of mankind, instead of being elegant triflers or refugees from reality:

> O pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
> For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood
> Upon our side, us who were strong in love!

Within the life-span of Wordsworth and Coleridge most of this transforming energy of love and hope was deflected by events from political into imaginative and ideal channels; the soul comforted itself for political disillusionment by exulting in its own 'mighty and almost divine powers' (Wordsworth, 1815 *Preface*). Nothing, it seemed, could be more important than exertions of such powers, nothing more satisfying than their results—so satisfying, that they could only be expressed in terms of 'Truth'. For the human mind, for better or worse, does call by the name of Truth whatever deeply satisfies, as well as that which, on the practical level, is found to *work*. But—and this

is where Fancy comes in again—not all such transformations were found to satisfy; there were those which merely amused or titillated, as well as those which seemed meaningful. The first were fanciful, the second imaginative. The business of the imagination was not to generate chimaeras and fictions—the *imaginary*—but to 'disimprison the soul of fact'. 'What the imagination seizes as beauty must be Truth', says Keats. Why must it? One can only reply in such terms as Wordsworth's, that when the mind of man is 'wedded to the universe', and works 'subservient strictly to external things', the creation, 'which they with blended might accomplish' does, in fact and in experience, produce a sense of something seen, something truly realized. Of course, there will be a metaphysical way of putting this, and naturally we find it in Coleridge: the world is really alive, and not dead; the life we project into it meets a life which is already there, and there is a mysterious link between man and nature, whereby man, in moulding nature, can be *unfolding* nature in the direction of her own striving. 'Dare I add', says he, 'that genius must act on the feeling that body is but a striving to become mind—that it is mind in its essence!' But whatever the metaphysical validity of what is seen by the visionary light, it remains important for us that the soul should be able to project upon the world 'the light, the glory, the fair luminous cloud'. It is only in dejection that the world seems cold and inanimate; if it can be transfigured (and the poets know that it can), then why say that the cold world is the real, the true world? Meanwhile, when joy and vision fail, there is always the metaphysical consolation that perhaps nature is not *naturata* after all—not really fixed and dead, that it is *naturans*, alive and growing, and ready to yield its secret to the eye that brings with it the means of seeing.

I cannot therefore agree with those who call the Fancy-Imagination distinction 'celebrated but useless'. It seems to me to point, not only to an observable difference between kinds of poetry, but to a profound distinction in our ways of responding to experience. In our own time the task of poets has become harder than ever; they must resist and subdue a world far colder and more hostile than Coleridge's. But some of them are doing it, even if each poem must be 'a fresh start and a fresh kind of failure'; and we can still use Coleridge's theory to distinguish between those who are genuinely performing this task and those who are merely using bygone modes to produce what is superficially or academically pleasing. Let us say, in conclusion, that

no poetic output demonstrates the distinction more strikingly than Coleridge's own. The difference between his 'great three' poems and most of his other verse is so extraordinary that it can only be called a difference in kind, and only accounted for on the supposition that in them he was using faculties and powers which lay dormant at other times. Professor Lowes has demonstrated that in the 'great three' poems the images stored in Coleridge's mind had undergone alchemical change by being plunged in the deep well of his subconsciousness, whereas elsewhere they are merely produced by a deliberate choice of the will, and rhetorically juxtaposed. To-day we talk familiarly about the subconscious, and think we are speaking more scientifically than our predecessors who discoursed about 'the soul'. But the difference remains valid, however we describe it or account for it, between poetry which is merely made or contrived in the top layer of the consciousness and that which springs from the energy of the poet's whole being, and in us (the readers) 'calls the whole soul into activity, with the subordination of the faculties each to each according to their several worth and dignity'.